

Knox Uniting Church Cluster

Sunday June 28th, 2026 – (Year A. Pentecost +5)

Sermon (reflection) by Russell Croxford at Ferntree Gully Uniting Church

Bible passages: Genesis 22:1-14 Matthew 10:40-42 (NRSVUE)

“Righteousness unveiled”

PREAMBLE (early introduction to theme)

My theme today is, “Righteousness Unveiled”. ‘Righteous’ may not be a such a popular word these days. In fact, it can sound quite negative. If someone is ‘self-righteous’ that’s seen as a bad thing. Sometimes we Christians are criticised for being too ‘righteous’. So, what does it really mean? Today we are looking at two passages that might say something about righteousness. The first story is about the time when Abraham was about to sacrifice his son Isaac at God’s request, but God intervened at the last second to prevent it. It’s a very unpleasant story if we are honest. We might ask, ‘where is righteousness in Abraham’s actions? Was he *really* being righteous? By complete contrast, our gospel reading tells of the time when the disciples were sharing the good news and having people receive it and respond to it. Is this a better picture of righteousness? I’d like to explore this with you, and I invite you to interact personally with both stories with your own honest questions - and even your doubts.

MESSAGE

Sometimes, when we are watching the news on TV, the news presenter will introduce a story by saying, “We offer a warning to viewers that the following story contains distressing content”.

Well, today’s story from Genesis 22 is such a story. It does, indeed contain distressing content. It is disturbing and upsetting, potentially leaving us feeling very unsettled in our faith. This is the story of the time God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. Abraham apparently acts in complete, faithful obedience and makes all the plans and preparations to go through with this horrific act until God intervenes at the last minute to prevent it.

In my preparations for today I really wanted to leave out this reading, because, honestly, I don’t like it and my guess is that you don’t like it either. But part of me felt that it was a cop out to avoid it, and that it was important not to ignore difficult passages like this in the bible.

When we come across a hard reading like this, I feel we need to be honest before God and each other and engage openly and honestly with it. And that includes asking the hard questions, even if there are no easy answers, and this passage raises more questions for us than it gives answers! So what are some of the questions we could ask about this story?

Why would God ask such a horrible thing of Abraham to sacrifice his son? What was God thinking?

Why would Abraham even attempt to go through with it? What was Abraham thinking?

If we are talking about righteousness today, where is righteousness in this story?

If this was a test of Abraham’s faith, did he pass or fail the test? Some would suggest he did pass with flying colours, of course. Even the writer of Hebrews suggests this (Heb 11:17-19). What do you think? Maybe Abraham did the *wrong* thing and should have said “no” to God, or at least questioned God, asking why God would require such a thing of him?

Maybe 'blind obedience' is *not* what God was hoping for from Abraham – or from us. What do you think?

For me, the real stumbling block is verse 2, where God asks Abraham to “take your son...whom you love...[and] sacrifice him as a burnt offering”. Are we reading this verse incorrectly? Are we missing something here? Is there any other way this verse can be translated? Actually, no. It's there, like it or not. We can skip over it, ignore it, or sanitise it, but it's still there'. Or we can engage with it as best we can.

One response is to say, “Well this is an Old Testament story. We don't have to believe everything in the Old Testament. Besides, God was different in the Old Testament!”

Was God different in the Old Testament? I believe our answer to that must be 'no'. And I need to clearly say that this God – *our* God, of the Old and New Testaments, would never want Isaac, or any child, to be sacrificed or harmed in any way. I did a lot of reading about this passage, and all commentators were emphatic that God did not want Isaac harmed. In fact, some of them suggested that this passage was written to denounce what was a fairly common practice in those days of child sacrifice (especially of the first born).

But this doesn't answer problem of verse 2 – that God asked Abraham to do it. But let's move on:

When we think about the connection between the Old and New Testaments, we need to hear what Jesus said about that. In Matthew 5:17 he said that he had not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets (i.e., the 'Old Testament'), but to *fulfill* them. So, Jesus didn't come to erase everything on the whiteboard and write a whole new message on it. He simply came to show the best way to live, and find life in him, and that sat right within their Judaic tradition, going right back to Abraham.

That being the case, the Old Testament forms something of a foundation or platform from which the gospel grows. But sometimes it is really hard to see just where the gospel connects with the Old Testament. For example, in today's two readings it's hard to see how they connect. Where do we see any seeds of the gospel in this Genesis 22 passage? Can you see any gospel message in this story?

When the lectionary people met and came up with the four readings for each week, they obviously tried to 'connect' them all with a common theme. I had trouble identifying that common theme this week. One excellent commentator I read every week is John van der Laar, and he suggested that the common link this week was the theme of 'true righteousness' (one of my earlier questions). A lesson of righteousness in Abraham's story and a lesson of righteousness in the experience of the disciples.

So, let's jump from Abraham to Matthew 10, in search of a connection.

Our short gospel passage comes at the end of what's called the Mission Discourse by Jesus (all of chapter 10) which starts off with Jesus sending his disciples out in mission with a bunch of instructions. He warns them that it will be a very tough assignment with lots of pain and rejection. But his words also contain hope and promise too. Today's few verses contain something of that hope and promise, assuring the disciples that some of the people they deliver the good news to, will receive it happily and demonstrate that by showing welcoming hospitality to the disciples, in this case with the example of giving them a cup of cold water.

The theological idea here is that the disciples are sent out in vulnerability, just as Jesus had himself come in vulnerability. And in their vulnerability, they learned to receive hospitality and acceptance, coming as a precious blessing amid the various trials they would encounter.

Just as an aside here, if God made himself vulnerable in Jesus, maybe this is a connection to God making himself vulnerable with Abraham, in that God tested Abraham without knowing how Abraham would receive him or respond to him. Something else to think about!

What stands out to me in our gospel passage is the vulnerability and dependence of the disciples – and maybe that's the secret to true righteousness. Vulnerability and dependence - in the very act of giving and sharing the good news. Humbly receiving as they gave. As Jesus had just told them, "Freely you have received. Freely Give" (v8).

Okay so let's go back to Abraham again. What do you think he 'received'? What do you think he 'gave'?

Let's remember he was human and thus flawed like any of us. He had already stumbled previously in his faith, even though he was considered a champion of faith. Even in this story with Isaac, he may well have made some big errors of judgement, for whatever reason. But my sense is that he still received from God. Perhaps he received even further growth in his faith, and perhaps part of that growth was the realisation that he needed to be more vulnerable and dependent – dependent on God's ultimate provision in all aspects of his life.

Now, I know...none of this answers the problem of verse 2! Why did God test him in such a nasty way? As I mentioned I did a lot of reading about this passage during the week and no commentators or scholars gave me a satisfactory answer to verse 2. A lot was said about God having a bigger agenda that we don't understand, or there are good reasons for him testing us, or that we like Abraham need to grow in faith. But are they satisfactory answers? Maybe. Maybe not.

Two stories. One about Abraham. One about the disciples. If you were Abraham, how would you react in his situation. If you were one of the disciples being sent out 'like sheep among the wolves' (v16), how would you react? What would you discover about yourself, your faith, or about 'true righteousness'?

By diving into stories like these, with deep, honest engagement with the challenges and questions they pose, that's surely when we grow. As we bravely wrestle with hard messages, that wrestling grows us, even if we don't always get clear answers. Some writers and preachers will try to package up some clear answers, but more often than not, they are shallow and cheap answers which rob us of the chance to grow. Statements like 'Just trust in God without questioning him and he will bless you', often just don't go far enough to answer the hard questions and doubts we have.

So, as I conclude, I would love to wrap this up with a neat answer that gives you something nice to go away with. But I can't do that this time. And it's because of that annoying verse two!

But when you dig into passages like this you will always find some gems.

Maybe one gem is to trust God more fully with all that is precious to us in life. Maybe it is to be more vulnerable, more dependent. Maybe it is to discover afresh that true receiving only comes from true giving, because giving is receiving.

Keep digging. The treasures are there.