



WELCOME TO ST PETER'S ASH

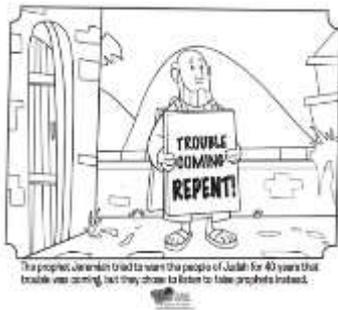


THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY AT ST PETER'S IS CALLED TO CELEBRATE, LIVE AND REFLECT THE LOVE OF GOD IN JESUS CHRIST

28th JUNE 2020

TRINITY 3

<u>READINGS FOR TODAY</u>	PARISH OFFICE: Closed until further notice. TEL: 01252 331161; e- mail: office@saint-peters-ash.org.uk BOOKINGS OF WEDDINGS & BAPTISMS – 01252 321517 WEBSITE: www.saint-peters-ash.org.uk
Jeremiah 28 v 5 - 9	
Romans 6 v 12 - end	
Matthew 10 v 40 - end	



CARE AND SHARE

We have started a new initiative to help those who may be short on food supplies in the current crisis. Food is being left outside church for people to take for themselves or to share with others who they know are in need. If you would like to donate any tins, packets, UHT milk etc. please leave it on the doorstep of the Rectory. So far, the scheme is proving to be very popular. Thank you.

CHURCH BUILDING RE-OPENING

Our church building is now open for **INDIVIDUAL PRIVATE PRAYER**. Social distancing, hygiene and cleaning of the building have to be carefully followed. Those at risk because of underlying health conditions or age are still urged to stay at home. We are using only the Lady Chapel and limiting entry to no more than 6 people at a time. We are open on Saturdays from 9 – 30 am to 11 am & Tuesdays 2 – 30 pm to 4 pm. This will be supervised with two volunteers each time.

You will be aware of the government announcement that churches are permitted to re-open after 4th July, according to individual circumstances relating to keeping everyone safe. As of Friday afternoon, when this sheet was being put together, we are still awaiting guidance from the Church of England about the measures that we will need to put in place before collective worship can resume. So, I'm afraid it is still a question of 'watch this space' at present.

Even after we re-open for worship, the services on this sheet will continue for those who will still be unable to come to church, due to health issues.

ANY LOCKDOWN STORIES TO SHARE?

We would love to hear some of your stories, experiences, thoughts, insights during lockdown. If you have something you would like to share please send to Fr Keith and it will appear on this weekly sheet. From this experience I know we all have a lot to learn about ourselves and each other.

Online PCC meeting – there will be a 'Zoom' meeting on Thursday 9th July beginning at 7 – 30 pm. Members of the PCC will receive an invitation to join the meeting.

COLLECT FOR TRINITY 3

Almighty God,
you have broken the tyranny of sin
and have sent the Spirit of your Son into our hearts
whereby we call you Father:
give us grace to dedicate our freedom to your service,
that we and all creation may be brought
to the glorious liberty of the children of God;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

DON'T FORGET OUR ST PETER'S PRAYER CHAIN

If you would like emergency prayer for yourself or somebody else please phone: 01252 322292 or 01252 323037 – this is a confidential service.

There is a **free** national phone line 'Daily Hope' that offers music, prayers and reflections as well as full worship services. Available 24 hours a day on **0800 804 8044**

BIBLE STUDY

'Great Prayers of the Bible'. There will be seven weekly sessions, online, using Zoom, starting on Tuesday 7th July 7 – 30 pm to 8 – 30 pm. Numbers will be limited to 12 participants, first come first served. If there is greater demand we will look into having other sessions. We will be using a course book priced at £3 - 20 available from Carol – please e-mail her or phone her on 313239.

If you haven't got internet access you can still do the course using the book by yourself – or, with one socially distanced visitor, perhaps.

Morning Prayer to share at 10 am on Sunday

If there is more than one person present, someone may wish to read the parts marked (L), everyone says the rest together. You can say alternate verses in the Psalm and in the Canticles. Please have a Bible to hand. You may wish to light a candle.

(L) O Lord, open our lips

All: and our mouth shall proclaim your praise.

- 1 O Lord our governor, †
how glorious is your name in all the world!
- 2 Your majesty above the heavens is praised †
out of the mouths of babes at the breast.
- 3 You have founded a stronghold against your foes, †
that you might still the enemy and the avenger.
- 4 When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, †
the moon and the stars that you have ordained,
- 5 What are mortals, that you should be mindful of them; †
mere human beings, that you should seek them out?
- 6 You have made them little lower than the angels †
and crown them with glory and honour.
- 7 You have given them dominion over the works of your hands †
and put all things under their feet,
- 8 All sheep and oxen, †
even the wild beasts of the field,
- 9 The birds of the air, the fish of the sea †
and whatsoever moves in the paths of the sea.
- 10 O Lord our governor, †
how glorious is your name in all the world!

All Glory to the Father and to the Son
and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning is now
and shall be for ever. Amen.

This hymn is said or sung:

Let all the world in every corner sing: my God and King!
The heavens are not too high, his praise may thither fly;
the earth is not too low, his praises there may grow.
Let all the world in every corner sing: my God and King!

Let all the world in every corner sing: my God and King!
The church with psalms must shout, no door can keep them out;
but, above all, the heart must bear the longest part.
Let all the world in every corner sing: my God and King!

(L) The night has passed, and the day lies open before us; let us pray with one heart and mind:

All: As we rejoice in the gift of this new day,
so may the light of your presence, O God,
set our hearts on fire with love for you;
now and for ever. Amen.

Pause to call to mind our sins and confess them to God:

(L) Let us return to the Lord our God and say to him:

All: Lord God,
we have sinned against you;
we have done evil in your sight.
We are sorry and repent.
Have mercy on us according to your love.
Wash away our wrongdoing and cleanse us from our sin.
Renew a right spirit within us
and restore us to the joy of your salvation,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

All say The Gloria:

Glory to God in the highest,
and peace to his people on earth.
Lord God, heavenly King,
almighty God and Father,
we worship you, we give you thanks,
we praise you for your glory.
Lord Jesus Christ, only Son of the Father,
Lord God, Lamb of God,
you take away the sin of the world:
have mercy on us;
you are seated at the right hand of the Father:
receive our prayer.
For you alone are the Holy One,
you alone are the Lord,
you alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ,
with the Holy Spirit,
in the glory of God the Father. Amen.

We now say the collect for Trinity 3 (see previous page)

Read Jeremiah 28 v 5 - 9 followed by Psalm 89 v 1 - 4 & 8 - 18 concluding with:

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever. Amen.

Read Romans 6 v 12 - end

All: Alleluia, alleluia. Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening. You have the words of eternal life. Alleluia.

Now read Matthew 10 v 40 - end Here are some thoughts from Fr Keith on today's readings:

Poor old Jeremiah, he certainly had a tough time doing God's will! He was prophesying before and during the first stages of the Babylonian conquest of Judah, nearly 600 years before Christ. Where we pick up the story today, King Nebuchadnezzar has already plundered the Temple in Jerusalem and also taken the king and the high ranking officials off to Babylon in exile. Jeremiah had warned that this would happen, because of the sinfulness of the people, but no-one had listened. Now, the false prophet Hananiah, was telling the people that God was saying that He had broken the yoke of the king of Babylon, and that the vessels from the Temple and the Kings' son and all the exiles were on their way back. But this wasn't true, and Jeremiah knew it. The peoples' punishment for their unfaithfulness to God wasn't yet over, it would be a generation before the Babylonian Empire was to fall to the Persians and the exiles could return.

Read around the verses set for today and you will see that there follows a bit of a showdown between the true prophet, Jeremiah, on the one hand, and the false prophet, Hananiah, on the other. Jeremiah points out that it would be good if what Hananiah had said were true, but, 'the prophet who prophesies peace can be recognised as one truly sent by God, only when his word comes true'. God had not sent Hananiah to speak to the people and, we are told, he died that same year.

When we read stories like this it is easy to think of them as being just about the past - in this case the past of 2500 years ago. What relevance can they possibly have for us today? Well, quite a lot actually, because we are called, in our own day, to be 'prophetic'. Our message, like theirs, is one of the need for repentance. Jesus has led the way in this. Right at the start of His ministry he goes around the countryside telling people to repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand. It is an urgent message, but one that will be received just as unenthusiastically by many, as was that of Jeremiah in his day.

In our recent Gospel readings Jesus has been warning his disciples of the opposition they will face in many quarters, even telling them to shake the dust from their shoes in the places where they are rejected. The plain fact is that most people don't like being told they are less than perfect. This is particularly so in today's society where, having perfect looks, a perfect house, a perfect car, and a perfect partner are what many people see as their only goals in life. People don't go out and spend, spend, spend for nothing!

Moreover, today, in response to the call for repentance, many will ask angrily – what for? Why do I need to repent? If people still have any sort of faith in God, in my experience, they think that everyone will get to heaven anyway. What's the point of saying sorry to a God who, they believe, will go along with their ideas of their own perfection? They think they're OK, so, obviously, God will think that too.

I've lost count of how many times I've heard, on funeral visits, the deceased described in 'saintly terms'. He 'never had a bad word to say about anybody', 'she would do anything for anyone, 'he never complained'. Perfection, again, is the key! I am always reminded on those occasions of the words from 1 John 1 v 8 – 9: 'if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us: but if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness'. Now, I'm sure that the bereaved are not telling lies when they speak of the many good things that their friend or relative did in their life. But, even the saints recognised their sinfulness and their need to ask for forgiveness. Our difficult task is to tell people that it applies to them too.

We know that when we go out in Jesus' name we are not alone, the Holy Spirit will be there helping us with what we need to say. But it's still scary! We have to remember though, that we are not doing it just as ourselves. Jesus tells us today that 'whoever welcomes you, welcomes me' and that we will have our reward. So, once again, it is trust and faithfulness that we need to cultivate in ourselves and in our fellow disciples, if we are to be the prophets that God wants us to be. Prayer helps!

Paul tells the Romans, in the passage we heard this morning: 'the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord'. Most people's ears prick up at the word 'free,' so that can be a good start when we are talking to them. The fact is that God doesn't ignore sin and nobody is perfect. It's a hard message, and, just as Jeremiah wasn't thanked for speaking out in his day, most of the time, neither will we. However, when it is 'eternal life' for our family, friends and neighbours, that is at stake, surely, that's worth taking a few knocks for?

Pause for your own reflections, and then we say the Apostles' Creed:

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.
I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

We now say together:

*All: You have raised up for us a mighty Saviour,
born of the house of your servant David.*

- 1 Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel, ♦
who has come to his people and set them free.
- 2 He has raised up for us a mighty Saviour, ♦
born of the house of his servant David.
- 3 Through his holy prophets God promised of old ♦
to save us from our enemies,
from the hands of all that hate us,
- 4 To show mercy to our ancestors, ♦
and to remember his holy covenant.
- 5 This was the oath God swore to our father Abraham
to set us free from the hands of our enemies,
- 6 Free to worship him without fear, ♦
holy and righteous in his sight
all the days of our life.
- 7 And you, child, shall be called the prophet of the
Most High, ♦
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way,
- 8 To give his people knowledge of salvation ♦
by the forgiveness of all their sins.
- 9 In the tender compassion of our God ♦
the dawn from on high shall break upon us,
- 10 To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the
shadow of death, ♦
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

*All: Glory to the Father and to the Son
and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning is now
and shall be for ever. Amen.*

*All: You have raised up for us a mighty Saviour,
born of the house of your servant David.*

Our prayers today are written by Fr Keith.

*In the power of the Spirit, and in union with Christ, let us
pray to the Father:*

*Loving Father, you send us out to say hard things to
others, in your name, give us strength and give us
courage, we pray. May we follow in the steps of Jeremiah
and all the true prophets, in telling people the truth about
sin, and urging them to accept the free gift of salvation
through your Son Jesus Christ.*

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer

*Loving Father, in a world where there is so much
falsehood, and many people are misled, be with those who
have power and influence, that they may be inspired to
work in the cause of justice, truth and peace. May they not
be discouraged by the immensity of the task they face.
Help us to do our part in upholding all that is good, and
rejecting everything that corrupts and takes away human
dignity and freedom.*

Lord in our mercy, hear our prayer.

*Loving Father, as the lockdown restrictions begin to be
eased, we pray that people will keep to the rules that are
still in place, and that they will continue to think of the
health and needs of others, not just themselves. Help us*

all to protect the vulnerable and those at risk from the Covid-19 virus. Be with those who are unwell from this and other illnesses and those who are caring for them at home, in hospital or other settings.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer

Loving Father, as we look forward to the day when we can worship you in church once more, we thank you for holding us together during this difficult time. Help us to continue supporting one another and the local community. May we go out in Jesus' name and be faithful witnesses to your unfailing mercy, love and care of all.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Loving Father, we give you thanks for your free gift of eternal life to all who believe, we ask that all the faithful departed may find rest and peace in your kingdom.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer

Loving Father, go before us, in all we do, with your most gracious favour, and guide us with your continual help, that in all our works begun, continued and ended in you, we may glorify your holy name, and finally by your mercy receive everlasting life:

Merciful Father, accept these prayers, for the sake of your Son, Our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

As Jesus taught us, so we pray: Our Father in heaven....

This hymn may be said or sung:

1 God is working his purpose out,
as year succeeds to year:
God is working his purpose out,
and the time is drawing near:
nearer and nearer draws the time,
the time that shall surely be,
when the earth shall be filled
with the glory of God,
as the waters cover the sea.

2 From utmost east to utmost west,
wherever foot has trod,
by the mouth of many messengers
rings out the voice of God:
Listen to me you continents,
you islands give ear to me,
that the earth may be filled
with the glory of God,
as the waters cover the sea.

3 How can we do the work of God,
how prosper and increase
harmony in the human race
and the reign of perfect peace?
What can we do to hasten the time,
the time that shall surely be,
when the earth shall be filled
with the glory of God
as the waters cover the sea?

4 We shall march in the strength of God,
with the banner of Christ unfurled,
that the light of the glorious gospel of truth
may shine throughout the world;
strengthen the weary, heal the sick
and set ev'ry captive free,
that the earth shall be filled
with the glory of God,
as the waters cover the sea.

5 All we can do is nothing worth
unless God blesses the deed;
vainly we hope for the harvest-tide
till God gives life to the seed:
yet, nearer and nearer draws the time,
the time that shall surely be,
when the earth shall be filled
with the glory of God,
as the waters cover the sea.

Let us pray:

God our saviour, look on this wounded world
in pity and in power; hold us fast to your promises of
peace won for us by your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ.
Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding,
keep our hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of
God, and of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord; and the grace
of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the
fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us and all who we
love, today and always. Amen.

May the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy
of God, rest in peace, and rise with Christ in glory. Amen.

PLEASE PRAY FOR THE SOULS OF THE RECENTLY
DEPARTED, ESPECIALLY: CALEB PERFECT; JOHNY
JONES; AWAIS ALI; TERRY RIGBY

READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK – ST PETER

Acts 12 v 1 – 11; 1 Peter 2 v 19 – end; Matthew 16 v 13 - 19

HAPPY BIRTHDAY THIS WEEK TO:

MARTIN HALL (1ST); ZACHARY LUFF (4TH)

THE HUNDRED CLUB JUNE DRAW

Congratulations to the winners:

First prize £79 – 50: Harry Coupland

Second prize £33 – 13: Evelyn Hadland

Third prize £19 – 88: Tony Whelton

If you wish to join the 100 Club – please contact Fr Keith.



Evening Prayer for this week

O Lord open our lips,
and our mouth shall show forth your praise.

O God make speed to save us.
O Lord, make haste to help us.

- 1 I love you, O Lord my strength. ♦
The Lord is my crag, my fortress and my deliverer.
- 2 In my distress I called upon the Lord ♦
and cried out to my God for help.
- 3 He heard my voice in his temple ♦
and my cry came to his ears.
- 4 He parted the heavens and came down ♦
and thick darkness was under his feet.
- 5 He rode upon the cherubim and flew; ♦
he came flying on the wings of the wind.
- 6 He made darkness his covering round about him, ♦
dark waters and thick clouds his pavilion.
- 7 From the brightness of his presence, through the
clouds ♦
burst hailstones and coals of fire.
- 8 The Lord also thundered out of heaven; ♦
the Most High uttered his voice
with hailstones and coals of fire.
- 9 For you will save a lowly people ♦
and bring down the high looks of the proud.
- 10 You also shall light my candle; ♦
the Lord my God shall make my darkness to be
bright.
- 11 As for God, his way is perfect;
the word of the Lord is tried in the fire; ♦
he is a shield to all who trust in him.

All Glory to the Father and to the Son
and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning is now
and shall be for ever. Amen.

This hymn may be said or sung:

1. Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!
Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,
Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood.

Refrain:

*This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Saviour all the day long;
This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Saviour all the day long.*

2. Perfect submission, perfect delight,
Visions of rapture now burst on my sight;
Angels, descending, bring from above
Echoes of mercy, whispers of love.
3. Perfect submission, all is at rest,
I in my Savior am happy and blest,
Watching and waiting, looking above,
Filled with His goodness, lost in His love.

*A Psalm is said: Mon 125; Tue 74; Wed 119 v 81 - 104;
Thurs 78 v 40 - end; Fri (St Thomas, Apostle) 139; Sat 84,
ending with:*

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever.
Amen.

*Two Scripture Readings now follow (see below). Between
the two readings we say:*

All: Rejoice and be glad
for you are the light of the world,
and great is your reward in heaven.

- 1 Blessed are the poor in spirit, ♦
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- 2 Blessed are those who mourn, ♦
for they shall be comforted.
- 3 Blessed are the meek, ♦
for they shall inherit the earth.
- 4 Blessed are those who hunger
and thirst after righteousness, ♦
for they shall be satisfied.
- 5 Blessed are the merciful, ♦
for they shall obtain mercy.
- 6 Blessed are the pure in heart, ♦
for they shall see God.
- 7 Blessed are the peacemakers, ♦
for they shall be called children of God.
- 8 Blessed are those who suffer persecution
for righteousness' sake, ♦
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

All Glory to the Father and to the Son
and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning is now
and shall be for ever. Amen.

All Rejoice and be glad
for you are the light of the world,
and great is your reward in heaven.

Readings:

Monday: Ezekiel 34 v 11 - 16; Acts 11 v 1 - 18

Tuesday: Job 28; Romans 12 v 1 - 8

Wednesday: Job 29; Romans 12 v 9 - end

Thursday: Job 30; Romans 13 v 1 - 7

Friday: Job 42 v 1 - 6; 1 Peter 1 v 3 - 12

Saturday: Job 32; Romans 14 v 1 - 12

Gospel Canticle: The Magnificat (The Song of Mary)

My spirit rejoices in you, O God, my soul proclaims your
greatness.

1) My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit
rejoices in God my Saviour; he has looked with favour on
his lowly servant.

2) From this day all generations will call me blessed; the
Almighty has done great things for me and holy is his
name.

3) He has mercy on those who fear him, from generation
to generation.

4) He has shown strength with his arm and has scattered
the proud in their conceit.

5) Casting down the mighty from their thrones and lifting
up the lowly.

6) He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the
rich away empty.

7) He has come to the aid of his servant Israel, to
remember his promise of mercy.

8) The promise made to our ancestors, to Abraham and
his children for ever.

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever.
Amen.

My spirit rejoices in you, O God, my soul proclaims your greatness.

Prayers of thanksgiving are made for the day that is ending. Intercessions are offered for the church, the world and for individuals, the sick and the departed.

Our Father, who art in heaven ...

The Collect for Trinity 3 (see first page)

Eternal Lord,
our beginning and our end:
bring us with the whole creation
to your glory, hidden through past ages
and made known
in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Lighten our darkness, Lord, we pray, and in your great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night, for the love of your only Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all evermore. Amen.

May the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.

COLLECT FOR ST THOMAS THE APOSTLE

(FRIDAY 3RD JULY)

Almighty and eternal God,
who, for the firmer foundation of our faith,
allowed your holy apostle Thomas to doubt the
resurrection of your Son
till word and sight convinced him:
grant to us, who have not seen, that we also may believe
and so confess Christ as our Lord and our God;
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Gloves Off Time!

Sermon by Bishop Jo for 28th June 2020 (Trinity 3) on
Genesis 22:1-14

God tested Abraham. He said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' He said, 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt-offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.' So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt-offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. Then Abraham said to his young men, 'Stay here with the donkey; the boy

and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you.' Abraham took the wood of the burnt-offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together.

Isaac said to his father Abraham, 'Father!' And he said, 'Here I am, my son.' He said, 'The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt-offering?' Abraham said, 'God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son.' So the two of them walked on together. When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son.

But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, 'Abraham, Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' He said, 'Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.' And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt-offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place 'The Lord will provide'; as it is said to this day, 'On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.' (Genesis 22: 1-14)

If I were to preach a sweet-and-tidy sermon today on the story of Genesis 22, where God asks Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, it might be about what it means that God provides. Here is a seminal OT story: on the one hand because it explores the nature of trust. But for others its seminal for its horror: it's one of those parts of the OT that makes people steer clear because it seems so completely unpalatable.

I'll never forget a Jewish teacher trained in the practice of midrash interrogating this text for two hours: investigating the echo behind every line, the depth in every word of this text – and arguing with it, with all the emotion that would seem to be lacking from the account itself. I was on the edge of my seat as he sweated it out. 'Abraham, take your son, your only son Isaac, the one whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you'. How dare God ask this of Abraham in just the same way that he first called him in Genesis 12? Hadn't Abraham already shown his willingness to respond then when he left his father's house for the sake of God's call to become a great nation? Why did he need testing again? Doesn't God know everything, doesn't God know Abraham's faith? And was it a test - or a trick: how could there be a great nation without

descendants, without Isaac? Wasn't Isaac God's miracle child, so that he could be the descendant who carries the line in order to fulfil God's promise? So why on earth would God negotiate for Isaac to die if it also means God's great plan for the destiny of the world dies with him? And what do you mean, 'take your son, your *only* son Isaac. What about Ismael? Abraham had two sons – was God encouraging Abraham to shun Ishmael, the child he bore with Hagar and sent away? And how could God underline Abraham's love for his son Isaac and in the same sentence ask that he turns him into a burnt offering – a holocaust? And what does offering mean anyway when it's a demand, an instruction... isn't that manipulation?

You get the gist. That's just the opening couple of verses. If you feel horror at this reading you are not the first and you're in good company with rabbis and sages down the ages. But don't leave it there: get to work, get wrestling. Use your anger, your confusion, your horror to get digging. If you want to get on with God there's no ignoring it, nor will folding your arms in a huff do any good. This is gloves-off time for exploring what it means to trust God, and what it means that God provides. In circumstances are excruciating.

In the summer of 2015 at the age of 35 my friend and former colleague Kate was told she had stage four colon cancer. All she could think of to say was, 'But I have a son.' He was three, and she was heartbroken to think she'd never even get to see his first day of school. She's a brilliant writer, and I quote here from an Opinion piece she wrote in the New York Times where she describes all the counsel she received from the crowd of well-meaning friends, family and complete strangers.¹ She divides them into three kinds: minimisers, teachers and solvers. The minimisers insist it's not so bad. Kate's sister was on a plane and told her seatmate about the diagnosis. Her neighbour explained how Kate's cancer was vastly preferable to life during the Iranian revolution – as if they were signed up to a competitive game of calamity Olympics. Then there are the 'teachers' who focus on how the experience is supposed to be an education. One even wished it would be for her a 'Job experience' – as if she needed any further suffering than she already had. Finally there are the 'solvers' who are disappointed that she's not saving herself. As Kate put it, 'There's always a nutritional supplement, a Bible verse or a mental process I have not adequately tried.

The minimisers, teachers and solvers among us want quickly to get to work on the Abraham and Isaac story. But it's no good. The horrors of the story remain.

And so we're forced to dig: beneath the layers of horror for clues to what's really at the heart of it. We find the story has a structure that hangs on Abraham uttering the words 'Here I am' at three key moments. Those are the same words of Isaiah when he hears God calling in Isaiah ch.6; and of Mary when she hears

Gabriel speaking to her in Luke ch.2. They're a sort-of no-holds-barred all-defences-down, gloves-off response of empty-handed trust. And there's a pattern to these three 'here I am' moments. Each has the same shape.

- At the start God calls, 'Abraham.' Abraham responds, 'Here I am.' God commands: 'Take.'
- At the end the angel calls, 'Abraham.' Abraham responds, 'Here I am.' The angel relaxes the command: 'Do not lay your hand.'
- In between Isaac calls, 'Father.' Abraham responds in the exact same words, 'Here I am.' Isaac asks, 'Where is the lamb?' But this time, at the centre of the story, Abraham breaks the pattern of the other two interchanges, and answers the question: 'God will provide.'²

'God will provide' are the central words in the story. But at the point they are uttered, they seem flatly to contradict all evidence. Is this a statement of duplicity and cowardice, a refusal to tell Isaac the truth until the very last moment? Or are they the words of the greatest faith, that, even seconds before the terrible sacrifice, Abraham still believed God would find an alternative outcome? The story is so bald, so terse: it doesn't tell us.

But the story sets in motion two strands in the Old Testament narrative. One is the theme of the lamb. The lamb represents God's mercy. On the night before Israel escapes from slavery in Egypt, the blood of the lamb is smeared on the doorposts so the angel of the Lord knows to pass over the Israelites when it smites the Egyptians. The lamb of sacrifice and salvation. The other is the theme of the son. Israel is God's son, God's only son, the bearer of God's blessing to the world from generation to generation. In the story of Abraham and Isaac, God's mercy in the form of the lamb intervenes to preserve God's blessing in the form of the son.

And now let's turn to the story of Jesus: which retains the same shape yet has a different outcome. Again it is set over three days. Again we have a son carrying the wood of sacrifice to a hill of execution. Again we have a son humbly proceeding in the face of horror while only partly comprehending what the father truly has in mind. But this time the lamb of mercy and the son of blessing converge into one. The words 'God will provide' take on a new resonance.

Do you see how the story of Mount Calvary both repeats and develops the story of Mount Moriah? In the Mount Moriah story, God discovers something God didn't already know: that Abraham, and therefore Israel, will, at the moment of truth, suspend all doubt, rationality, independence, and dearly-held commitments, and place its destiny entirely in God's hands. 'Here I am'. When Jesus is in Gethsemane, the story is repeated: Jesus, and therefore Israel, at the moment of truth, suspends all doubt, rationality,

¹ Kate Bowler, 'What to say when you meet the angel of death at a party?' op ed at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/26/opinion/sunday/cancer-what-to-say.html>

² Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox 1982) 186-7.

independence, and dearly-held commitments, and places its destiny entirely in God's hands.

But that's not the whole of what's going on at Mount Calvary. There's something more. Humanity discovers something it didn't already know about God: that at the moment of truth, God's sovereignty, dignity, majesty and power will be suspended and God's life will be placed entirely in human hands. 'Here I am'. If Mount Moriah is where God tested humanity, Mount Calvary is where humanity tested God. And on Mount Calvary we see God's true colours. God provided: and what did God provide? A lamb, yes, a son, yes. But in the end, God provided God.

After Mount Moriah, God knew humanity would in the end be faithful, whatever it cost. After Mount Calvary, humanity knew God would be faithful, whatever it cost. Jesus said, 'Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.' In Abraham and Jesus, humanity loses its life and finds it. In Jesus, the Holy Trinity loses its life for our sake and finds it.

But why is it necessary to go to such excruciating lengths to prove such things? Why is it essential so drastically to put one another to the test? What I believe happens on Mount Moriah is that God seeks to find out why Abraham has trusted and obeyed. God is saying, 'Did you respond because of the promise of your descendants becoming a great nation? Did you follow because you wanted security and success and sons and celebrity? In other words, am I in the end a vehicle for you, a means to an end, a ladder you can kick away when I've provided the things you can't get for yourself? Or will you be true to me even if all these things are snatched away?' By putting Isaac in jeopardy, God threatens to take away every promise made to Abraham. Abraham has to choose between life, love, longevity, lineage, land - and God. And Abraham chooses God.

In Jesus God is asking the same question but in an even more cosmic way. 'Are you following me because I offer you forgiveness for your past and freedom for your future? Are you believing because faith gives you confidence, reassurance, inspiration, companionship, wisdom and insight? Or will you be true to me even if I am hungry, naked, despised, powerless, cursed, alone? But in Jesus the same question is turned around and directed to God. 'Will you be with humanity if it is faithful, obedient, devoted, pious and adoring? Or will you be with humanity even if it denies, betrays, flees, despises, executes, derides and tortures? Jesus is *us* choosing between God's benefits and God: and choosing God. Jesus is also *God* choosing between ideal humanity and the real thing, and choosing the real thing.

In Abraham humanity says to God, 'There is nothing more important than you. Here I am. I will give up my whole world to be with you.' In Jesus, God says to humanity, 'There is nothing more important than you. Here I am. I will give up everything to be with you.'

For all her scathing remarks about those who can't see her condition truthfully, my friend Kate has found companions who recognise the horror. 'Some people,' she says, 'give you their heartbreak like a gift. One time 'my favourite nurse sat down next to me at the

cancer clinic and said softly: "I've been meaning to tell you. I lost a baby.'" Kate goes on, 'The way she said "baby," with the lightest touch, made me understand. She had nurtured a spark of life in her body and held that child in her arms, and somewhere along the way she had been forced to bury that piece of herself in the ground.'

The cross of Jesus isn't something to be explained by the minimisers, the teachers or the solvers. Like Kate's condition, it's all consuming, bewildering, indescribable. But the story of Abraham and Isaac, like the nurse's soft intervention, helps us understand. God says, 'There is nothing more important than you'. I wonder if, with gloves-off open hands, we might say that too. 'There is nothing more important than you. Here I am!'

(Also available to watch on Youtube)