

**Our Particular Idolatry of the Heart**  
**Lent 2, Year B**  
**8 March 2009**

The stabbing of an Avondale schoolteacher this past week is a reminder, if we needed it, of what a perilous place the classroom can be. Yet teachers now report a new stress factor in their professional lives – one more likely to afflict them in well ordered schools frequented by the upwardly mobile middle class. This is the phenomenon of pushy parents who are constantly on the teacher's case about securing the best possible education for their children. The key phrases that teachers have come to dread are, "my special child," – "our gifted child" – "you need to understand the unique difficulties of my child." These anxious driven conversations are not just the stuff of the odd parent teacher meeting through the year, but are rather a constant refrain of phone calls, e-mails and unsolicited visits.

What makes these conversations particularly difficult is the fact that few of these children are budding geniuses, and that sometimes the children's difficulties are compounded by the parents neuroses. It takes great tact and patience to get the message across that often the beloved child is able perhaps, but not exceptional, and that they would probably be happier and more productive if there was less pressure at home.

For years I ran away from this morning's first reading, with its barbaric overtones of child sacrifice. Surely this was an embarrassing echo of the appalling pagan religions that Israel had slowly turned away from, to worship only the true and loving God Yahweh. And my imagination had been powerfully affected by the way Benjamin Britten

uses this story in his “War Requiem,” to depict God as a stand in for the power brokers of Western Europe who decided to accept the sacrifice, and so condemn a generation of young men to the slaughter on the western front.

But in recent years I have come to see the deep truth in the story of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac. It is tale for our time that, amongst other things, encourages parents to take an honest and realistic look at their expectations of their children, and of their role in their children’s lives. Sometimes we can make an idolatry out of our children, expecting them to live out our unfulfilled ambitions for ourselves, to be the successful and significant people we failed to be. Or we are tempted to hothouse their development, so that we can bask in their reflected glory. Or we may think that we have generated out of our bodies our faithful little friend who will be our life time companion and carer, who will never disappoint us the way so many of our adult contemporaries have.

These are the idolatrous, unfair and illegitimate expectations that need to be laid on the altar of sacrifice, that need to be let go of, and said goodbye to. Give them back to God so that our children will be set free to be themselves, and not the prisoners of our unconscious dynastic ambitions. For the truth is that we are temporary stewards of our children, the ones who responsibly care for them for a time, equipping them as best we can for a future that is theirs to realise as best they can, according to their own lights. And even if we do a good job of bringing them up, we cannot then insist that they become our friends for life, and our grateful servants, bound to us in claustrophobic bonds of affection.

The story of the healing of the ten lepers has much to teach us in this respect. Only one turned back to say thank you to Jesus for his healing. If in their adult lives our children don't send us a postcard from their overseas experience, don't send us a card on our birthday, don't ring us up on Christmas day then that will be sad, that will be a disappointment, but we can't insist that they do these things. For we share the same dilemma that God has with the human race – he wants our free, unforced, spontaneous loving response – our decision to believe in him and love him because we want to, and not because we have to.

Don't get me wrong – the Bible clearly teaches that children have a duty to respect and care for their parents. But if they fail to do that then on their heads be it – they will have to answer to God for it – it's not our job to enforce this expectation. For we can't make our children be our friends when they become adults. If they choose to do that then it is a bonus, a blessing, which like many blessings comes unexpectedly and out of the blue. And sometimes parents and children are built differently emotionally, and therefore can never be close. The key thing is that our children are themselves, not projections of us. When we have children we fling our DNA into the future – it's a risk, it's an adventure, and it's not our business to try and control the outcome.

The issue of what is to be laid on the altar of sacrifice isn't just one for anxious parents. The chances are that every one of us here, if we care to take a long hard look at our lives, will have a particular idolatry of the heart that is tailor made to the contours of our hopes and dreams and fears. It too will be tied in the unfulfilled ambitions of our

lives, of our longings for admiration, and respect and approval. Or maybe it lurks in the dark corners of our hearts as a besetting temptation that we cling to because it reinforces a false sense of the self that we are rather fond of.

In the season of Lent will we have the courage to lay these on the altar of sacrifice? Have we carried out a fearless moral inventory to identify our particular idolatry of the heart? Can we now let it go into the hands of God?

How fearful, anxious and protective we can be of these false dreams? But consider how the Transfiguration dovetails into the sacrifice of Isaac. Mark doesn't tell us about the content of the conversation between Moses, Elijah and Jesus, but the other gospel writers do. It concerns the terrible fate awaiting Jesus in Jerusalem. Through it God the Father is strengthening Jesus, encouraging him, to go forward into this ultimate act of his ministry. And Jesus is allowing himself to go into harms way, is allowing himself to be put in jeopardy in this way, without retreating into the temptation of a retired life as a former inspirational spiritual leader.

What will soon follow the Transfiguration is the ultimate sacrifice by which the world is set free. And although Jesus is as it were tested to destruction in his freely accepted vocation as faithful Son, he will receive back far more than he can have bargained for. The light flowing out of him on Mount Tabor is a first instalment of the transformed, transfigured life that lies on the other side of death.

When we let go of our anxious, controlling, neurotic, narcissistic false dreams on the altar of sacrifice, something surprising and unexpected often comes along. William Blake as on to it when he wrote:

He who binds to himself a joy does the winged life  
destroy,  
He who kisses a joy as it flies lives in eternity's  
sunrise.

But first we have to pray the hard prayer:

God, I give back to you everything I most wish to  
keep. Take from me anything you want. Leave me  
with everything or nothing. Lead me where you will.