The Call to Sacrifice

'The day is too far gone. We'll stay here tonight and move out at first light tomorrow.' Abraham's voice betrayed his weariness as he gave instructions to his servants. The boy was already playing happily. The day had been a great adventure for him. He would fight off the tiredness. His dogs yapped around him, eager to see him back.

Abraham watched him. Innocent and free. The boy had no idea how close he had been to death - and at his father's own hand....'Make sure the boy has food,' he told them. 'I want to be alone for a while.' He walked a little way back along the path they had just travelled. His step was heavy. The walk of an older man. He felt the past three days had aged him more than all his years. He moved rythymically - in tune with the words constantly drumming through his mind - 'God provides. God provides. God provides.' Abraham had clung to those words throughout his ordeal. God had promised. God had provided. It had been a sore test of his faith. He wondered even now how he had come through it. It was like a terrible dream. Abraham knew he had not been dreaming.

He came now to a place where a stream ran between rocks and straggled trees and shrubs. He stopped and fumbling in the folds of his robe, drew the long knife from his belt. It was still stained with the ram's blood. He hald it out in front of him. His hand shook and a cold shudder swept through him. Bending towards the rocks he slid the blade into a crack and leaned his whole weight on to the handle till it snapped, throwing him backwards. He staggered, then regained his balance and slowly lowered himself to sit on the rocks. That knife would not be used again - not by anyone - ever.

The sky was already reddening towards sunset. Its colours deepened on he parched mountains. Abraham could still make out the hill where he and Isaac had built the altar. It seemed it was trying to hide itself behind among the range. He recalled how he had looked back towards its summit as they had begun the journey back, and whether it was a trick of the light, or a vision, or just his tiredness, for a moment the whole mountain top had changed. It was no longer barren, but covered by a great city with its walls standing right at the edge of the sheer escarpment on the eastern side. In a moment the picture had faded giving way once more to the barren tree-dotted slopes.

Abraham thought about that vision now. Surely it was a vision. A great city; full of God's people; pride of all the nations. That, after all, was the promise God had given him. His family would become innumerable and spread throughout the earth. All the other nations would look to them and be blessed through them.

He had never forgotten that first vision from God, all those long years ago. He pictured the day when they left Haran. he had been so proud of his family as they streamed out of the city with all their har-earned flocks and possessions. His brother and many other friends had tried to disaude him, but Abraham was sure. He knew there could be no rest for him until he obeyed the call of God.

They were great days with Sarah too. She had shared the vision, and the hardships and struggles as they moved southward - always travelling south. But as the years passed, Abraham had seen the light fade in her. Time had run out. She knew there could be no chidlren now. How then could the promise to populate the world be true when they could not have a single son of their own?

There had been the day when Abraham thought Sarah had discovered again her old zeal and loyalty. She had suggested Hagar take her place and give him the child they needed. The birth of Ishmael had been hard to bear, and bitter jealousy had taken root in Sarah.

With the painful recollection, Abraham felt his own love for Sarah still as strong in him. They had travelled far together, sharing their whole lives. He could understand. He could forgive. Sarah had always found it hard to conceal her feelings. He had understood her outburst of scornful laughter when she heard she was to have a child in her old age. Like sunshine and showers on a Spring day, laughter and fear alternated constantly during the months of her pregnancy.

Abraham remembered how, during those months he had asked himself the same question over and over again. 'Why this way round? Why can't it all be straight-forward? Why couldn't they have a son when it was safe to do so? Why does God always seem to be testing us?' Every time, Abraham knew the answer - 'Trust God. God will provide. God will keep his promise.'

Trusting is difficult enough when you can't see a way forward, but it is well nigh impossible when you are going in the opposite direction to where you are supposed to be! However, when you arrive, the way there does not seem to matter any more. It had been a fantastic day when Isaac was born. There was certainly no lack of laughter. The whole community celebrated his birth. For days on end people streamed in to see the miracle baby. Sarah had been so happy. the tents rang with her laughter, just like the old days. Radiant laughter, so different from the cynical, faith-shattered cackle of recent years. Abraham saw himself cradling the infant and showing him proudly, to everyone who came.

The sun had passed the horizon now. Closing shadows coincided with the shadow which momentarily swept across this happy reminiscence. Why had God chosen this way to test his faith? Asking him to give up the future that had just become possible! Demanding that he sacrifice the most prescious thing in his life! - the key to the future!

Abraham could hardly believe now that he had been strong enough to follow the leading of God. Sacrifice his child? It was partly to get away from the pagan practices of child-sacrifice that his family had first left the great city of Ur, and he himself had left Haran. Was God now taking him back to the ways he had renounced?

He had kept the word from the Lord to himself. How could he tell Sarah? Inevitably, Sarah knew all was not well. But she knew too how he needed to seek out God and make sacrifices. He had simply explained that God had told him to go out into the hills and offer a sacriofice, and he would take Isaac with him. Sarah had argued against the boy going. Maybe she had sensed in Abraham's manner that there was something wrong. Eventually, Abraham had taken the easy way. With the boy and two servants he had slipped out before dawn, without rousing Sarah. Going out was hard, but what of the return? What explanation would he give? The sorrow to come was unimaginable. He could not envisage the bitterness wih which she would receive the news. His mind numbed, he kept repeating the promise - God will provide; God will provide.

The journey had seemed like a lifetime. Isaac had been so full of life. Inquisitive about everything the passed, he drew out his father's knowledge of the terrain, he birds and beasts, cloud formations - and always chattering eagerly about the sacrifice - 'I'll help you build the altar. Will it be high on the hilltop? We'll have to look for some big stones. Will we have a great fire. Where will be get the animal to sacrifice?'

'God will provide, my son.' The words had stuck in his throat. He had turned away then, as the full force of what god had asked him to do dawned on him. It struck him like a blow in the stomach. he felt physically sick.

That night, while Isaac slept, his father had gone out of the camp and wept bitterly. He pleaded with God to deliver him from this command. However, there was no further word from the Lord. Only the same promise going round and round in his mind - 'God will provide; God will provide; God will provide; God will provide.' Alone in the darkness, Abraham had resolved that the only way to cope with the situation was to let Isaac see it all as a game. That morning they had left the servants and taken the path which climbed towards the hills where the altar was to be built. Abraham let Isaac carry the wood for the altar fire. The boy was excited to be sharing in the preparations. Seeing the boy with the wood was like a knife in Abraham's own heart. He remembered now, how from that moment he had been numbed, walking and talking as though in a dream.

They found the place on the plateau at the hill top. The boy ran around lifting stones and piling them up to make an altar. To him it was a great game. In the end it was Isaac himself who actually lay down on the altar, laughing, and with such implicit trust in his father. 'Look father, I'm the sacrifice.' How could his father speak to him of irreverance? Abraham had bound him with cords and and even as he raised the knife the boy was laughing, trustingly.

The moment had come. Abraham stood behind him...the knife poised. 'Look father!' In a stupour, Abraham could not move his eyes. The boy, tightly secured to the altar could not point. 'Look, father!' he repeated. Abraham followed the boy's eyes towards the ram. As it did the animal turned to run, but in its panic became entangled by its horns in a thornbush just below them. Abraham fell on the ram, desperate lest it free itself and run from him. It seemed so strange he had not heard or seen it till that moment.

The animal captured, Abraham untied his son, and held him close to him for a long while. Isaac wondered at the sudden, stifling embrace. 'My son! My son!' Abraham was weeping openly now. 'My son! God has provided!'

Abraham remembered little about sacrificing the ram except that the voice of God was as clear in his mind as when he had first heard it in Haran. Suddenly he knew that God had put him through one final test. The promise was still intact. God would make them a great nation and bless the whole world through his family. Deep within him Abraham knew that just as he had been tested so he would be blessed. Now the blessings would follow. Now, nothing would stand in the way of God's purposes. God had provided. God would go on providing!

'Father!' Isaac touched his father's shoulder. 'Father, it will be dark soon.' Abraham rose. He grasped the boy's hand. Some day he would have to tell him the truth. But not tonight. Isaac winced at the pressure of the older man's grip. Abraham's handclasp was saying, 'My son. My future. The hope of the world. The promise of God. God has provided. God will provide.'