

2nd Sunday of Lent (B)
(Genesis 22:1-1,9-13,15-18 / Mark 9:2-10)
01.03.2015

The liturgy brings together the story of God's call to Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac and the gospel account of the Transfiguration of Christ on Mount Tabor.

Reading these Bible passages this morning, I hear the call addressed to us to be an invitation to reflect on the sacrificial aspect of all true love.

Let me explain...

Today's first reading from the Book of Genesis draws attention to Abraham's love for his son. We are told how God called out to Abraham saying: *Take your son, your only child, Isaac, whom you love and offer him to me.*

What a strange request to make of a loving father! Understandably, we are shocked by it. What is demanded of Abraham is sacrificial love!

We are told at the outset of the story that in making this demand of Abraham *the Lord was putting him to the test.*

It seems to me that we can understand God's testing of Abraham in these terms: the Lord was calling upon the patriarch to accept that his love for Isaac gave him no rights over his son. Abraham was being called upon to recognise that this child of the promise was a gift confided to him for a time. Ultimately, Isaac belonged to God. The same is true for every parent-child relationship.

Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his beloved son, at God's behest, reminds us that clinging to those we love, giving in to the temptation to hold on to them, to fulfil our own selfish needs, goes against all that true love stands for and the blessing it should bring about.

The fruit of our love for another should lead to that double blessing which is their freedom of heart and our own; just as the fruit of our knowing ourselves to be truly loved by another will lead us feel a blessed inner freedom.

You see, *where there is love there is freedom.*

The point should be clear: our love for another never gives us property rights over that person and their love for us should not rob us of our freedom.

We can struggle to grasp this. We speak so readily of our loved ones as *ours*.

To see another person as our property is actually to steal their life from them. To take another to be our property is to have reduced them to slavery status and a slave is someone deprived of living their own life as they would.

In the gospel passage read for us we heard the Father's voice make it clear that Jesus was His Beloved Son.

The Father's voice which came from the cloud said: *This is my Son, the Beloved.*

The purpose of the vision accorded to Peter, James and John when they saw Christ robed in light, was to prepare them for Jesus' forthcoming passion and death on the cross.

At the hour when all would be shrouded in darkness on Golgotha, it was hoped that these disciples would be led to remember this extraordinary moment when they beheld Christ robed in light and revealed in all His glory on Mount Tabor.

In Christ's passion and death we witness the greatest love ever shown.
We witness God's self-giving love made manifest in Christ-Jesus.
There is no greater love than this: to give one's life.

The Scriptures underline for us how *the Father did not spare His only Son, but gave Him up for us.*

In giving *His Only Son, His Well-Beloved*, God gave His very self to us.

The Father made this gift freely and in doing so He left His Son the freedom to give His own life-blood for the salvation of the world.

Freedom, gift and sacrifice!

Freedom, gift and sacrifice are shown to be at the very heart of love by both Scripture passages heard this morning.

These same themes are woven into the Passion narratives of the gospels, which today's Scriptures readings prepare our hearts to listen to in their light.

Our two readings flag up for us how at some point all true love is tried and tested, and, even crucified.

It seems fair to me to say that the Scriptures heard this morning draw to our attention that true love will always involve some degree of pain and suffering.

Any one of us who has even truly loved another will know this to be true by our experience.

The reason is clear.

Ultimately, love requires of the lover that he or she give his or her own life.

We have Jesus' own word and example for it: *There is no greater love than this: to give one's life.*

This is the love we are all called to in imitation of Christ.

At the same time, all true love requires of the lover that they let go; that they cease clinging to their loved one.

There are many in this congregation who know that only too well.

(I think, for example, of some who have been bereaved recently.)

A well-known resurrection scene comes to my mind when I reflect on the need for all of us to let go of loved ones at a certain point - not only in death, but in other ways for other reasons.

I think of that scene in which we hear the Risen Christ say to Mary of Magdala: *Do not cling to me.*

True love is proved in leaving our loved one the space they need to live in freedom of heart.

Anyone who has ever truly loved another will know that they are called to leave their loved one the liberty to live and give their life as they feel led to do so.

While we might want our loved one to live or give their life one way (our way), if we truly love them, then we will respect their personal life-choice.

We will accept that we have no power over them and we shall not seek to control them.

Again I stress my point: love leaves the loved one free!

To truly leave one's loved one free demands much of the lover. It often entails heartfelt pain.

It also requires of the lover two qualities which are hallmarks of God's love for humanity: vulnerability and humility.

Yes, to truly love another always renders the lover vulnerable.

It leaves the lover's heart wide open to the possibility that pain will be occasioned by their loved one's possible rejection and/or dismissal of them. It accepts, however hard this is to live through, the possibility of a lack of reciprocity in love.

In saying that I am reminded of CS Lewis' words famous words: *To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything (I would add anyone) and your heart will be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to be sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal, avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket - safe, dark, motionless, airless - it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy is damnation. The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is Hell.*

It seems to me that what Lewis is saying to us there amounts to this: to love or not to love is to make a life or death choice.

Yes, to love or not to love is as radical a choice as choosing to live either in heaven or in hell.

Lewis is so convinced of the importance of risking love that he goes on to affirm his belief: *the most lawless and inordinate loves are less contrary to God's will than a self-invited and self-protective lovelessness.*

Our fear of being made feel vulnerable, our fear of being made feel humble, humiliated, can make us shy away from receiving another's love for us, just as it can lead us to shun going out to others in love.

Our bid to be self-protective can make us overly cautious, hardened, untouchable when it comes either to receiving or to giving love.

The consequences for ourselves in both cases are grave.

If we refuse either to receive or to give love what we are refusing is life.

Our refusal spells death.

By our refusals we find ourselves feeling sad, cut-off, isolated, painfully lonely: dead! At least certainly less than fully alive.

Lewis concludes: *We shall draw nearer to God, not by trying to avoid the suffering inherent in all loves, but by accepting them and offering them to Him; throwing away all defensive armour. If our hearts need to be broken, and if He chooses this is the way in which they should break, so be it.*

The story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac and the gift God the Father made of His Beloved Son on Calvary, prepared for and made manifest already on Mount Tabor, both point to the fact that true love is which has been called *Gift-Love*.

In true love there is only one desire and only one response to that desire: to give! To give what one

holds most dear and, ultimately, that means to give one's very self.

It is good for us to be reminded during these Lenten days of the *Gift-Love* to which we are called.

It is good to be reminded that by living *Gift-Love* we are renewed in the very image of God.

Wherever we are placed in life, whatever our life situation, in all our relationships with others, let us strive to live that greatest love to which God calls us, the love He shows us He has for us and which He makes it possible for us to live in His own image and likeness: *Gift-Love*.

Lewis tells us: *Gift-love comes by grace and is called charity.*

The liturgy reminds us that Lent is a season of grace and that we are called to express our response to God's grace by reflecting His love through charitable attitudes in regard to all.

The Fathers of the Church have always seen the *Gift-love* of Abraham, his willingness to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac, as an image of the Father's *Gift-Love* of His Beloved Son, the Christ.

It is to be hoped that our meditation on these two Scripture texts will lead us to be generous in our self-giving love, willing to share with others what we ourselves have received.

Just as the Father's love cost Him, so our love, if genuine, will cost us.
In the words of Dick Hills: *Love is a costly thing!*

Gift-love tends to lead us over and beyond what is reasonable.
It has us give our very self totally in a reckless generosity.

It seems to me that we can read the words the Father spoke from the cloud as more than just a pointing out of Jesus' identity, but as an indication of His self-gift in His Son.
I do not think it is an exaggeration to hear the words the Father spoke when He said *This is my Son, the Beloved* as an expression of the gift He made of His very self, the essence of His being, to us.
It seems to me we can hear the Father's words in this sense: *Here is the gift I am making to you. I offer you what is dearest to my heart. Here you are. I give you my Son.*

Such a gift is irrational, not in the sense of going against reason, but in the sense of going over and beyond reason.

Just as we speak highly of someone who goes over and beyond their duty as a fully committed person, so we can speak of God as being totally committed to us by the gift He made of Christ-Jesus.

The gift the Father made to us in His Son Christ-Jesus has been expressed along these lines: *God who is good and loves humanity, decided in all freedom to act in a most irrational way to bring us and the whole of fallen humanity back to Himself.*

What appears to us as irrational is in perfect accord with the reasoning of God's heart as the Scriptures reveal it to us.

What the Scriptures reveal to, over and over again, is what we see made manifest in the incarnation of Jesus and brought to perfection in Christ's paschal mystery: radical love to the point of sacrifice.

These concepts escape us, we cannot grasp them, but they can grasp us and carry us along into fullness of life, if only we welcome them for ourselves and then allow them to find echo and

reflection in our lives.

This is what I hear the word of God addressed to us this Sunday inviting us to consent to in our lives: that our lives become what God's life is revealed to us to be in Christ-Jesus: *Gift-love*.

In response to God's total self-gift, we are called to nothing less than total self-giving.

Amen!